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DEPARTMENT OF NURSING EDUCATION

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SOME FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES IN THE TEACHING OF ETHICS¹

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THE PRESENT SITUATION

I SUPPOSE there never was a time when the older generation did not discuss with pain and alarm the moral depravity of the young and did not make some attempts to lead or drive them back into the only safe path—the path they themselves have walked. This very human tendency is responsible, I am sure, for much of the criticism of the younger generation which is now so popular in all kinds of circles—in schools and colleges, in society and in professions like our own.

It is always safe to assume a moderate degree of pessimism about the new generation from at least 75 per cent of those on the shady side of forty. But it takes more than this to account for the widespread impression of ethical confusion and instability and even of moral crisis which is disturbing many good people in the world today. The fact seems to be that we are facing not merely the usual slight shifting of scene from one generation to another, but one of those periods of social revolution and reconstruction when the whole stage setting is changed about and a new act begins. In this general upheaval it is not surprising that there should be some questioning of the older moral and ethical teachings and perhaps some shifting of moral values.

These values do shift and grow from age to age, with some losses, but always some sure gains. It is useless to say "The rules of life which were good enough for our fathers are good enough for us." After all, each generation has its own salvation to work out. It is true that certain fundamental ethical principles are universal and unchangeable, but the interpretation and application of truth changes and different people arrive at truth by widely different methods. It is essential then for us to try to understand the spirit and ideas of this changing world of today, if we are to find a basis for the teaching of ethics to young nurses.

¹ From a paper read at the Teachers College Alumni Conference, February, 1922.

THE NEWER MOVEMENTS OF THOUGHT IN RELATION TO ETHICS

The older standards of ethics have drawn largely from religion and philosophy. Within the last generation a new world of ideas has been opening up in the field of science and these sciences, particularly social science and psychology, have profoundly affected our whole outlook on human conduct. The teacher of ethics today who has not kept in touch with these new sciences and who still relies mainly on the preachings of Plato or Paul to drive her lessons home will find herself talking in an entirely different language from her students who consciously or unconsciously have soaked in the newer point of view. This does not mean that we can discard religion or philosophy—but simply that we may have to find a different approach both to these subjects and to ethics. Along with the growth of the social sciences has come a wide extension of what we may call the democratic movement, with its emphasis on the worth of the human individual and his right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We are probably more accustomed to thinking of democracy in political terms, but it is the same idea which is back of the woman's movement, the labor movement and all the other modern efforts to secure a better and freer life for human beings. Within the last few years we have been feeling a distinct stirring of the democratic idea in the old, conservative strongholds of our profession. Theoretically we all believe in democracy, but when we find it upsetting some of our old established customs and challenging our most sacred traditions, we are inclined to think it a pretty dangerous thing. The mere questioning of those old beliefs and traditions suggests to many of us the red flag of revolution, and any effort to secure a larger measure of freedom is apt to be attributed to the dreadful contagion of Bolshevism—a convenient term for anything we feel to be destructive and demoralizing in modern life.

Too many people think that democracy means *getting all you can and giving nothing*. There is no doubt that in the beginning of any democratic movement we shall find a tendency to stress rights and privileges and to think too little of responsibilities and duties. I suppose that is what one superintendent of nurses means when she says that "the present decline in nursing ethics is due to the overworked idea of democracy." But democracy has a definite ethical basis, indeed it may be said to include the whole idea of ethics, which is fundamentally the *ideal of human brotherhood*. This means something much more than individual liberty and self-development. It implies the responsibility of every one of us for the welfare of the whole group. That is why education is so essential in a democracy

and why progress is often so slow. We have to take the whole group with us.

Training for democracy, as defined by Felix Adler, means "*Men and women interested in social progress and competent to contribute to that progress.*" Our modern educators express much the same idea in saying that "social efficiency" is the end of all education. This implies knowledge, culture, individual development, freedom, health, expertness, but all that they may be used in service to the social group of which one is a part. The purpose of all education is thus essentially social—or should be. Nursing education is certainly no exception.

RELATION OF ETHICS TO SOCIAL WELFARE

According to modern authorities the terms "ethical," "moral," "social," are all in the last analysis identical in meaning. Whatever makes for social order and progress is right, moral, ethical; whatever is contrary to the common good is wrong, immoral, unethical. Our effort, then, in teaching ethics is to help people to consider what they can contribute to the common good, and to get them to commit themselves definitely to the realization of that ideal in all the activities of life.

This is not an easy thing to do; our ideas of what is best for ourselves or others change from time to time. What may seem right for one time or place or person may be wrong for another. Conduct which may be quite harmless for an individual as such, may be wrong for her as a member of a professional group, or what may seem best for the professional group may work an injury on the public at large. The question of what is right and what is wrong cannot, therefore, be settled for all people and for all times. Experience has shown that certain things are on the whole good and other things bad for the group, but no general rule, not even the Golden Rule, can be made to apply to all cases.

RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL FOR HIS CONDUCT

This places on someone the responsibility of deciding in any given case what is the right thing to do. Custom or tradition or law have been the great authorities in the past, but the trouble with custom is that it is rigid and static. It does not provide for new conditions or for progress. Law or authority may secure conformity, but it does not necessarily change the individual. One may be compelled to obey the laws of the family group from fear of punishment or social opinion, but this is not morality or ethics. It is only when one *assumes responsibility for his own acts* and does what he feels is

right from choice, even when it is opposed to convention or custom, that he may be said to act ethically. Most people have not yet reached this higher level or have only partially reached it. Adults, who are still completely dominated by the opinions of the herd, may be said to be morally retarded or to have the moral age of say ten or twelve years. They cannot be said to behave morally unless they act from a sense of conviction and reason and are guided by their own conscience. Any training which attempts to secure obedience by threats of punishment or coercion is not ethical training at all, though it may be necessary for people with lower levels of intelligence who are unable to think for themselves or in emergencies of life and death when everything depends on prompt action.

THE RELATION OF JUDGMENT TO ETHICAL CONDUCT

This idea of *personal* or *reflective morality* presupposes the ability to do independent thinking. If the mind is immature or the power of reason suspended, we say that the person is not responsible for his acts, but no such excuse can be made for the adult individual of normal intelligence who refuses to use his mind and allows other people to do all his thinking for him. *His first ethical obligation is to learn to think.* Moral judgments are not different from any other kind of judgments. We use the same faculties and the same methods as in any other kind of reasoning. We must have knowledge to guide us in making right decisions, and we must be trained so that we can weigh and sift evidence and not jump at rash conclusions. We must try to rid ourselves of prejudice and emotional bias which lead to unjust judgments. The trouble with most of us is that we use our minds mainly to justify the things we do or do not want to do, rather than to impartially analyze actual facts and conditions as a basis for action. There are many situations in life where we are unable to judge wisely because we are not in command of the facts. Then we have to follow the advice of the best experts we can find, people with wider knowledge and more experience than we.

THE EMOTIONS—THE DRIVING POWER FOR HUMAN CONDUCT

But we all know people who are impartial and brilliant thinkers and yet who do not always act in the interests of the common good. We need something more, something which touches our spirits and sympathies and makes us actually *desire* to do the right thing. This comes not so much from the intellect as from the instincts and emotions. Modern psychology tells us that there are no essentially bad instincts and no distinctly moral instincts which can be singled for intensive cultivation. Human nature is in itself neither good nor bad.

The instincts supply the motive power and it all depends on how they are harnessed and what channels they take, whether they result in good or bad conduct. Steam may be harnessed to drive an engine or it may explode the boiler if it has no safety valve.

The way to develop a strong character is not by trying to bottle up the surging impulses of youth, but by finding some safe and useful outlet for them and helping the individual to keep them under wise control. Whatever extremes the Freudians may have been led into, they have given us this invaluable lesson, that the effort to suppress normal human emotion is dangerous not only to morals, but to physical and mental health. If troublesome emotions can be sublimated or drained off along harmless or socially useful lines, the harmful internal tension is relaxed and energy released for work and creative effort. The docile, repressed, subservient individual is not as a rule the type of person who is going to accomplish much in life. It has long been observed that it is the high-spirited, quick-tempered, obstreperous boy or girl who often makes the best man or woman in the end, and this is true also of the young women in our schools. Some of the most troublesome have a fund of vital energy which, if it could be salvaged and re-directed, would do an immense amount of useful work.

How can we rouse the right kind of sympathies and fire our young people with worth-while interests and enthusiasms? Certainly not by crushing out all emotion. That is what makes them hard and cold. Nor yet by encouraging the frothy, sentimental kind of emotion which evaporates in talk. We have said that the emotions generate the heat which drives the motor, but *unless the heat is converted into action it is worthless*. Felix Adler remarks that "If it means nothing more than the raising of the internal temperature, it is like fever, a sign of moral disease rather than health." He adds, however, that ideals and emotions may be *stored up as potential energy*, ready for future use and that this is one of the important ends of moral education.

THE PLACE OF IDEALS IN ETHICAL TRAINING

Ideals are formed by contact with people whom we love and admire, by the heroes and heroines of history and literature, by religion and nature, by art and by human experiences which impress themselves deeply upon us. Youth is naturally idealistic and if it is not inspired with worthy ideals it will tend to accept less worthy ones, so it is a part of all education to suggest or provide worth-while objects around which ideals and emotions may cling and to widen as rapidly as possible the circle of social relationships through which these ideals may find expression.

WHERE THE WILL COMES IN

We have agreed on the need of social intelligence and social ideals. The next thing is to see *how we can carry out our fine impulses* and our reasoned decisions in a practical way and with a certain degree of vigor and persistence. How many of us see perfectly clearly what needs to be done and feel quite warmly for our fellow-man but lack the will and the persistence to get to work and do what we know should be done. Our ideas and intentions are perfectly good, but somehow they never bear fruit. *Ethical or moral training is useless unless it provides for the training of the will*, and this brings us to the question of discipline about which there are so many different kinds of opinion.

Many people think that a person is well disciplined when he obeys almost involuntarily at a word of command. That would not fit in with our requirement for the higher levels of ethical conduct. Dr. Dewey tells us that *discipline means the ability to grasp a definite purpose as one's own, to think out its consequences and to hold on to it in spite of all difficulties and distractions until it is accomplished*. The training of the will does not consist then in compelling people to do something they don't want to do, but in helping them to get hold of the right kind of purposes, putting them in situations where there are worth-while things to do, and in giving them lots of practise and increasing responsibility in working them through to the end.

There is, therefore, no way of training the will except by *tackling obstacles, solving real problems, living and working with people and undergoing the steady discipline of life*. Force or compulsion may result in certain habits of conduct, but these are easily broken unless they are adapted to our inner nature and unless the intelligence and the will of the individual are back of them. The weak-willed, flabby, spineless people are usually those who have developed no dominant purposes of their own and so are willing to let other people lead them. They are always at the mercy of any one who gains an influence over them. This does not mean that the self-willed, headstrong person is justified in refusing to be guided by others. Obedience is quite compatible with an independent will, but it is a voluntary, reasoned obedience, not an automatic or slavish subservience, a willing compliance with necessary laws, an acceptance of others' opinions and directions because they are right and reasonable and contribute toward the end in view.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE SELF AND THE COMMON GOOD

The great question is whether after all we can get people *willingly to commit themselves to this ideal of the common good*. Human

nature is so constituted that it is constantly seeking happiness and satisfaction and that satisfaction comes through the fulfillment of its natural instincts and desires. This wish for individual self-expression and self-realization cannot be suppressed. There is an old saying that *we may drive Nature out with a pitchfork, but she always comes back*. She may be thwarted and twisted, into a "balked disposition," but she still persists to the end of life in trying to wring satisfaction out of the most unpromising conditions or at least to steer clear of dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

People differ widely, of course, in what they regard as satisfying. There are the purely physical tastes on the one hand and the higher planes of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual satisfactions on the other. Everyone will agree that the latter are the richer and more permanent satisfactions. They come from the cultivation of the mind and the spirit, but they may be as narrowly selfish as the grosser forms of self-indulgence, if they are pursued solely for the development of one's own personality and the enrichment of one's own life. We all know people whose philanthropies are pursued in an entirely self-seeking spirit and even the search for one's own salvation may be a very selfish thing.

The difference between the unsocial self-centered egotist and the altruist is that the one seeks to satisfy only his narrow, personal self and the other has so enlarged his "self" and so identified it with the larger family or professional or national or world group, that he finds his satisfaction in furthering the advancement of that group. For the success of his club or school or profession he may be perfectly happy to sacrifice personal pleasure, money, time and many other things; for his family or religion or country he may even sacrifice life, but this is because he prizes the satisfactions of his bigger social self more than the satisfactions of his smaller, personal self. In working for the larger good, he is spending himself, but he is also fulfilling his social nature and thus finding happiness.

Individual development and self-expression are therefore not incompatible with social welfare and social progress, so long as they are pursued in this spirit of the common good. The trouble with many of those who are clamoring so loudly for liberty and self-expression, is that they want to assert themselves and to do as they please regardless of the effect on others. More often perhaps they persuade themselves into believing that the thing they want *does* make for the common good. Fortunately there is a wide range of possibility for useful service which brings into play every human instinct and capacity and every kind of special talent. The "social" idea of service does not stress self sacrifice as an end in itself. It invites us all to

invest the best gifts we have for the common good with the assurance that in this way we shall get the most out of life and reach the highest possibilities of our own development. It is the duty of the individual not to sacrifice or waste his capital of brains or brawn or spirit, but to make the *best* of himself in order that he may be able to give the most to the common good. Each person has a different contribution to give and the great thing is to study ourselves and those we work with in an effort to find where our capacities and interests can be used to best advantage and where each individual may reach his greatest development and therefore his greatest happiness.

But the impulse must come from within. The old idea of "doing good" to others and planning their lives in the way that seems best to us, without consulting their interests or securing their coöperation, is a violation of the most fundamental ideals of modern ethics. The object of all our work with students and others should be *their growth*, not the regulation of their conduct, or the direction of their activities, or the gratification of their desires or the accomplishment of our own individual purposes, but their growth especially in knowledge, in judgment, in social ideals, in happiness and in the power of wise self-control. A discussion of some of the methods by which these ends may be realized in our nursing schools must be postponed till some future issue.

WHO'S WHO IN THE NURSING WORLD

XIII. LAURA R. LOGAN

BIRTHPLACE: Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada. PARENTAGE: Scotch-English. PRELIMINARY EDUCATION: Amherst Academy, 1905; A. B. degree, Acadia University, 1901. PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION: Mt. Sinai School for Nurses (New York); B. S. degree, Teachers College, Columbia University. POSITIONS HELD: Surgical Supervisor and Instructor, Mt. Sinai; Instructor, Mt. Sinai; Night Supervisor, Mt. Sinai; Superintendent of Hospital and Principal of Training School, Hope Hospital, Fort Wayne, Indiana; Director, School of Nursing and Health, General Hospital, Cincinnati; Professor of Nursing and Health, University of Cincinnati. AUTHOR of various papers on professional subjects. OFFICES HELD: President Graduate Nurses' Association, Cincinnati; President Ohio State Association, President Ohio State League of Nursing Education, Secretary National League of Nursing Education, Vice-President National League of Nursing Education, President National League of Nursing Education, Chairman Local Committee Red Cross Nursing Service, Cincinnati.